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From: Derek Matory/R4/USEPA/US
To: Carol Monell/R4/USEPA/US@EPA, Franklin Hill/R4/USEPA/US@EPA, Randall Chaffins/R4/USEPA/US@EPA, Freda Lockhart/R4/USEPA/US@EPA, LaTonya Spencer/R4/USEPA/US@EPA, Brad Jackson/R4/USEPA/US@EPA
Cc: Silvina Fonseca/DC/USEPA/US@EPA
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EPA Hedging On Massive Cleanup Of Homes On Radioactive Mining Sites

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EPA is hedging on the prospect of undertaking a potentially precedent-setting cleanup of an area in central Florida where the agency has thousands of people living on former phosphate mines may be exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, with an agency spokeswoman saying EPA has not made any commitments beyond a limited aerial survey it conducted last month.

At issue are approximately 10 square miles of former phosphate mining lands near Lakeland, FL, where EPA has taken no cleanup action having concerns since the late 1970s that the indoor air of homes built on the lands is contaminated with cancer-causing levels of radon. Disagreements between EPA, state and industry officials over the appropriate cleanup standard for the sites, along with the potentially overwhelming cost of conducting such a massive cleanup, have been among the reasons for the delay.

EPA has long considered aerial surveys to be the next step in addressing its concerns about residential exposure because they would allow the agency to better characterize how much of the land in question is contaminated and to what extent. The agency has developed plans to conduct surveys on several occasions in recent years, but until January 2011, no surveys were conducted.

According to the EPA spokeswoman, the agency collected aerial measurements over a portion of the Coronet Superfund Site, one of 28 phosphate mining sites considered part of the agency's Florida Phosphate Initiative and one of the only ones where EPA has taken cleanup action. Preliminary results from this limited aerial survey showed there was good correlation with results from ground-based surveys also conducted, confirming that additional aerial surveys could be an effective means of measuring radiation over a larger area.

However, "EPA has made no decision about additional survey work in areas outside the Coronet Superfund site, and will continue to monitor the State of Florida on follow-up actions," the agency spokeswoman says. The EPA spokeswoman acknowledged that the agency remains concerned that long-term exposure to radiation on former phosphate mines "could pose an incremental increase in cancer risks."

Surveying the area is an important step that could provide EPA with key information that the agency would need in order to conduct a cleanup. A lawyer following the issue, told *Inside EPA* previously. Without comprehensive survey data, EPA has been unable to determine how bad the problem is, how widespread it is, and how many homes might have to be cleaned up, the lawyer said.

If EPA does not initiate a cleanup, the data it collects in such surveys could be used by residents to launch new common law damage suits against the companies that mined the area, according to the lawyer. If successful, such suits could force the companies to conduct cleanup or to pay damages to the affected residents.

Derek Matory, Chief
Superfund Remedial Section D
Superfund Remedial Branch/Superfund Division
USEPA Region 4
61 Forsyth Street, SW
Atlanta, GA 30303

(404)562-8800



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